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Westways Women

Carobeth Laird: Twilight Triumph

By Arlene Cook

IT TOOK CAROBETH LAIRD several arduous minutes to cross the fifteen-foot living room with the aid of two quad-canes. Each step, a silent statement, a confirmation of her victory over the vexatious limitations of crippling arthritis and old age.

She slowly settled her four foot ten inch frame onto a straight-backed chair, then turned to me with the same ethereal smile she'd laid on me the first time we'd met—thirty years ago.

As a pigtailer, I'd burst into our neighbor's darkened living room one day after school, accidentally disrupting a private consultation between a patient and that mysterious entity known as the Christian Science practitioner.

I recall being drenched with embarrassment as I caught the shocked expression on Mrs. Seller's face. Tears welled up before I could back out the door.

It was the visiting practitioner who set the shattered session straight. A very short woman, she reached out and patted me on the head. She looked directly into my frightened eyes and lulled my frayed spirit with a captivating smile.

I was in and out of the Sellers home many more times during my growing up years. The incident was never mentioned, nor did I ever see or hear of the mysterious practitioner again.

Then, in 1976, thirty years later, when I was a free-lance writer with pigtailers of my own, I attended a branch meeting of the National League of American Pen Women. Our guest speaker was announced as Carobeth Laird—a new, exciting author of several books about Indians.

The room was crowded. I sat near her, attracted by her unusual wit, her extraordinary command of the English vocabulary. Her smile haunted the edges of my memory bank.

During refreshment time, Carobeth Laird and I became better acquainted. When I asked for the opportunity to interview her for an article, I sensed that it was more than my admiration for her abilities and enthusiasm at the age of eighty plus years that attracted me.

Our interview time was sandwiched into a schedule crowded with speaking engagements, autograph parties and travel preparations for a Philadelphia appearance on the "Mike Douglas Show."

As she began to talk, I listened to more than her words. Her voice gave no clue to where our paths had crossed.

An infectious impishness danced like winged spirits in her eyes, betraying an unquenchable lust for life. Where had I met those eyes, that smile before? It was time to put my pilgrimage into the past aside and do what I'd come to do.

Cook: When did you first become interested in writing?

Laird: When I was three years old. I couldn't write at that time. I didn't know my alphabet. I would sit down at my desk and cover pages and pages with scrawl, the same time repeating aloud what I thought I was writing. Then I would give it all to my father and ask him to take it down to his newspaper office and print it into a book.

Cook: When did you write your first piece with publication in mind?

Laird: I remember trying to write short stories as a teenager, before I met Harrington. They were always rejected. That was a long time ago.

Cook: When you married Harrington, working with words became a daily way of life. It has been said that he married you because you had a perfect ear for linguistics. Did he take advantage of your interest in writing?

Laird: I had a good deal of experience

in writing while with Harrington. Although words were his life, and he had a great feeling for the structure of words, he had none at all for the spirit of them, the rhyme or music of words. Often, when he was writing a letter, he could pace back and forth, tear his hair and say, "Word this for me. Word this for me."

I was just a green girl, I never even finished high school. Nevertheless, I would attempt to word it for him and usually succeed. Every now and then he was forced to leave the field and go back to Washington, which he loathed, to the Bureau of American Ethnology, to try and put his notes in order—I wrote a twenty-five page paper on the Taos pronoun for the Smithsonian Institution.

Cook: What is the Taos pronoun?

Laird: It's a very complicated linguistic structure. Harrington diagrammed it all out on great sheets of butcher paper which he spread out on our kitchen table. Ordinarily, most of my work was absorbed into Harrington's.

Cook: After you left Harrington for Laird, did you begin to write for yourself?

Laird: Yes. I tried to write acceptable prose, which is so different from the writing of technical linguistic notes. Fiction biography always attracted me. I would attempt to write on Sunday afternoons. Although George had long, hard, work weeks, he'd take the two or three children we had by that time for a walk or a drive, so that I could work.

Cook: Did you try again to publish any of your work?

Laird: I think I sent a few pieces in, but they were rejected.

Cook: You described yourself as going through an atheistic period in your life when you married Harrington. Define the specific spiritual stages of your life.
Laird: First of all, my parents were Methodists. But they were primarily

Encounters

Carobeth Laird's first book in print, *Encounter With An Angry God*, was published by Malki, an obscure museum press located on a California Indian reservation. Larry McMurty, writing in the *Washington Post*, gave the book this accolade—"Were it fiction, one would have to think it great, if not the great American novel."

First published in 1975, *Encounter With An Angry God* is in its second hardback edition. Ballentine Books published it in paperback and *New Dawn Magazine* printed excerpts of it as a September 1977 "best seller bonus."

Encounter With An Angry God is a sensitive and uncompromising recounting of Carobeth's six year marriage to the legendary field ethnologist John Peabody Harrington, and of the twenty-one-year Indian love song born of loneliness, when she abandoned all hope of being "uplifted on the wings of genius."

Harrington was a man possessed by his calling. A mistrustful, sober scholar, he shunned normal social amenities as time wasting, down to the common use of eating utensils. So obsessed was he that time was fading fast for the American Indian, that from the date of their marriage in 1916, until Carobeth ran off with one of Harrington's Indian informants, the couple worked feverishly, gathering linguistic data from remote southwest Indian tribes.

Harrington often sent Carobeth, alone, for months at a time, out into the vast southwest desert in one direction, while he traveled in another, gathering data. He insisted that there was not time enough for her to wean their daughter. The task of rearing their child, and Carobeth's older daughter, a love child, was delegated to Carobeth's parents in San Diego, California.

John Peabody Harrington left more

than six tons of unpublished and unorganized notes—including the remains of long dead animal specimens and partially eaten lunches. Nevertheless, twenty scholars, working full time on Harrington's papers, discovered little about the personality of the man himself.

Dr. Catherine Callaghan of Ohio State, Harrington's biographer, accidentally discovered the existence of the ex-Mrs. Harrington and traced Carobeth to Los Angeles. She flew to California and called on Mrs. Laird. Dr. Callaghan's probing questions turned the key that opened a treasure house of recollections more than fifty years old.

At the encouragement of Anne Jennings and Harry Lawton, both of Malki Press, Carobeth translated those memories into word visions. *Encounter With An Angry God* was the product and Carobeth Laird was described by Tom Wolfe in *Harper's Bookletter* as "an exciting new literary talent bursting forth at the age of 80."

Mrs. Laird's second book, *The Chemehuevis*, purchased by Malki Press in 1971, but not published until 1976, is a more scholarly type work. Available in both hardback and paperback editions, *The Chemehuevis* is based on early research compiled with her Chemehuevis husband, George Laird. The book represents the most complete collection of myths ever compiled from the Chemehuevis tribe.

Carobeth has spent a lifetime soaring as a free spirit. Her ability to take life where she finds it and better it for herself and others around her has been a lifelong adventure. It is not surprising that this remarkable woman celebrated her eighty-second birthday with a third book in the hands of her New York agent. *Limbo* is a true-experience novel based on her nightmare experience in a Southwest nursing home. Although it reads like a



Carobeth and George Laird circa 1935

heart-wrenching thriller, it presses too close to reality to be taken lightly.

This "delightful imp," as she's been called, is a sought after speaker. She is perfectly at ease in front of any size audience and was not the least bit ruffled when television crews showed up at her Poway home to film a segment for "Today's Woman."

Her enthusiasm for writing has not waned. She is a regular contributor to the *Journal of California Anthropology*. The stack of papers beside her portable electric represent the backbone of still another major work.

"The working title of this next book is *The Beginning*," Carobeth stated warmly, her hands caressing the papers. I could almost see her reach back into the years.

"While going through Harrington's papers in the Smithsonian, researchers came across many of my papers, written in my own hand during 1919 and 1920. They graciously returned to me all of my research notes. They are invaluable, irreplaceable. When complete, this work will be a valuable addition to the field."

When this work is complete and shipped off to a publisher in another six months, what then for Carobeth Laird? The answer is buried somewhere in the cartons, in the wealth of material stacked in her room—and in the memory of a woman who herself is just beginning.

—A.C.

seekers. Once they attended a Holiness meeting outside Coleman, Texas, where we lived. My parents were quite impressed with the sincerity of the group. My father, being a deacon of the church, took it upon himself to let the group use the Methodist church one afternoon. That created a great furor, resulting in my parents withdrawing from the church. So I was unthinkingly a Methodist in my early years. In time, my parents became deeply involved in the Jehovah's Witnesses. I can't say that I followed along with that. I was beginning to think for myself.

Really, my atheistic period began on the date that I learned that there was no Santa Claus. My parents had lied to me, in all kindness, about Santa Claus, the gentleman with the white beard at the North Pole. How did I know that they hadn't lied to me about the gentleman with the white beard up in the sky? After I married George, I began to slip back more toward Christianity, although not a conventional Chris-

tianity. Then I experimented with Spiritualism, and the communication, supposedly, with other beings.

Cook: Did you ever communicate with the departed?

Laird: Yes, in my belief, I don't know if it was with the departed or with my richly furnished electric subconscious. But in my belief, I did. Also with elves and fairies, if it's of interest to you, to say nothing of demons.

Cook: What brought this period of your life to an end?

Laird: A nervous breakdown. I was overwrought, overtired, worn down from childbearing. Anxious over finances. It would be called in our modern vocabulary, a very bad trip without drugs.

Cook: The next stage?

Laird: Christian Science brought me out of it. So then, I entered the Christian Science phase. I became a deep student of Christian Science, eventually a Christian Science practitioner. I must say, if I am to be absolutely honest, always with a certain willing

suspension of disbelief. But I continued as a practitioner for many years. After George's death in 1940, it was my source of income, as well as my joy, my profession. It was the way I earned enough to rear my five children.

Cook: You were a Christian Science practitioner? (I felt my face flush as my mind raced back over the years to the only other time that phrase rolled over my tongue.) You lived in Poway. Did you ever see patients in Escondido, fifteen miles north?

That same smile crept over her face. "Yes," she replied softly. "I had an office downtown. Sometimes I visited in the homes."

The time frame was right. Was I imagining now when the name Laird seemed to suddenly sound familiar? "Did you ever know Mrs. Sellers?"

"Oh, yes. She was devout. I saw her many times in her home."

The scene in that darkened living room came bursting to life as if it had happened only yesterday. Even the smells of the musty tapestries filled the space around me. I looked at the "exciting new writer" sitting opposite me. All I saw was that ethereal smile beaming back at me. That same peace that she had laid on me years ago washed over me. This time I would not back out the door. Our communication was just beginning.

Laird: It was in 1955 that my thoughts began to expand, and I undertook the writing of a novel. I wrote under my maiden name, since I didn't think that a practitioner of the Mother Church would be favorably considered if she published a novel.

The church seemed to be getting more and more narrow and cruel in its



The eternal triangle: John Peabody Harrington, as he looked in 1918; Carobeth with her daughter Georgia in 1926; and George Laird, the Chemehuevi Indian informant. Opposite page: Carobeth Laird as she appears today

attitudes. I had a directive that said practitioners were not to give spiritual assistance to anyone who was in the hospital of his own volition. I couldn't accept that. I had written the novel, which was never published, but it had given me a great deal of delight in the writing of it. I had expanded my thoughts. I wished to enter the mainstream of intellectual thinking, so I withdrew from the church.

I am, at the present time, distrustful of gurus of any type. I want to be free to believe what I desire. I want the God within me to guide me.

Cook: Was it this freed spirit that permitted you to write so outspokenly of your life with Harrington and of your love for Laird? Certainly a refined and retired practitioner of the Mother Church, living in her eightieth plus year, is not the likely person to speak candidly of such matters as her illegitimate child.

Laird: I suppose so. Also the change in society, its outlook on personal sexual matters. I think that I have changed with the times, rather more than most people my age.

Cook: That is an understatement.

Laird: In the spirit of the times, I felt no embarrassment about the things I looked into my heart about. When I agreed to write *Encounter*, I knew that if I wrote anything at all it must be honest, down to the last detail as I knew it. *Encounter* is an honest book.

Cook: Less than five years ago, both you and Malki Press were unknowns. How did you get together?

Laird: About 1969, Professor Lowell Bean of California State University at Hayward, became very much interested in finding some trace, some information on the Chemehuevis Indians, who were, up to that time, virtually an unknown tribe. He went to Washington, D.C., and searched the archives under the Harrington collection. Some way or other, Dr. Bean came across the name of George Laird as an informant. The name Laird struck him. My daughter, Georgia Laird Culp, was secretary/treasurer of the Chemehuevis tribe at that time. He sent two of his students to interview

her, and she brought them to the guest house where I was living. During our second interview, I asked a knowledgeable question about their linguistic methods. It then came out that I had a sizable manuscript on the Chemehuevis, for which I had not found a publisher. The upshot was that Malki agreed to publish *The Chemehuevis*.

Cook: Was Encounter With An Angry God another manuscript you had stowed away?

Laird: It wasn't even thought of at this time. Interest in Harrington and his stockpiled works was mounting. The anthropological grapevine was buzzing over Malki's find and my relationship to Harrington. I was soon visited by Dr. Callaghan. I dredged up old memories, anecdotes. Later, I shared them, informally, with Malki editors Harry Lawton and Anne Jennings. Most of it was black humor.

Cook: They insisted that you write the book?

Laird: At first I hesitated. For one thing I had no notes, no diaries. I would have to depend entirely on memory. For another thing, my memories are not altogether kindly. I had been given a book Theodora Kroeber wrote about her husband. It was so gracious, so lacking in anything faintly

derogatory. One should remember the dead in that way or not at all. They persisted. I finally came to believe that I could write without too much unkindness, without a sense of malice, rather with appreciation for the man's marvelous intellectual equipment along certain narrow lines. And yet I could tell the personal side of it, too.

Cook: What writing habits did you establish with Encounter?

Laird: I wrote every day. I didn't go by hours, rather I tried to write up to three pages a day. I worked afternoons, because that's when my energy seemed highest.

Cook: How long did it take you to complete the manuscript?

Laird: A few months.

Cook: You and George Laird reared your family in rural Poway, California. Was it difficult being married to an Indian?

Laird: These are the years of the Indian. It was different in the Twenties. Yes, there were times of discrimination. The children had their troubles. Our oldest daughter has an I.Q. of 150. She was far and away the brightest student in her class. But when award time came, she always ended up just under someone else.

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REQUA REMEMBERED

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not far behind in their activities, though more inclined toward communal singing.

A few shots were fired from time to time, apparently only out of high spirits because, besides a luckless dog which got in the way of one, there were no injuries from them. Curiously, if a weapon was produced with serious intent, action in the vicinity stopped and the offender was disarmed.

In the general store, Bill Glover kept a tolerant though watchful eye on proceedings. If a discussion in his domain grew overheated he removed the participants to the street, one in each big hand. They returned to him for repairs; he administered first aid to all in need of it, mopping streaming noses and patching abrasions.

It was a noisy, hilarious, exuberant night and everyone had a wonderful time. Dodging nimbly from time to time to avoid flying objects, I had the feeling I was taking part in a ritual pageant of the frontier I'd read about back in Iowa and maybe I was at that.

Then it was Sunday and we were leaving. Reluctantly we said good-bye to the delightful lady of the gourmet campfire cooking and the haunting tales and her sons and the ranchers. With a gift of several jars of the fine salmon, we drove down to the village. It was largely intact.

There were a few broken windows, a splintered chair lay in the street. A number of black eyes and minor bruises were visible on sheepish faces and in odd corners numbers of the night's revelers slept peacefully.

"It's good for them to blow off steam," said Bill Glover. "Never any hard feelings afterward."

Mr. Barrow, broom in hand, had the last word. "... Wasn't nothin' here but a little Indian village when I come ... forty years ago ... them trees!" He shook his head and looked accusingly at Bill Glover, Captain Jack, Molly, the owner of that Fenimore Cooper canoe, and the others.

"By rights," he said finally, "this here town oughta been named Barrowville 'stead of Requa."

We shook hands all around and headed for Oregon. **W**

CAROBETH LAIRD

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Cook: Now that you've returned to the Poway area as a celebrity, are you still shunned?

Laird: I can't say that I was shunned in those years. Let's just say that some residents were conscious of their superiority.

Cook: And now?

Laird: Oh, now! The respect of middle America for the written word is something terrific. I was among some honored at a recent PTA meeting. It turned into a gigantic autograph party.

Cook: How do you feel about the fame and fortune that has come to you at this time in life?

Laird: I'm essentially the same person I was twenty years ago. Why should I feel any different now? So far, it's only a modest degree of fame, and not exactly a fortune.

Cook: How do your children feel about the book?

She paused. I watched her select her words carefully. More carefully than she had all afternoon. Her smile faded.

Laird: I have six children living. We are not a close family. I think most of them are interested in the things I've tried to do.

Cook: In the last few years, you've unwrapped and touched on memories older and more poignant than most people in a lifetime. Were you to retrace your steps, would you run off again with George Laird?

Laird: Would I? He is absolutely the highlight of my life. He is indeed more real to me today than any living being I have known.

Her smile was back. She seemed happiest today, reliving the memories of yesterday. As we drank a cup of tea together and talked of that afternoon thirty years ago, it dawned on me that all that was most important in her life were already moss bound memories the first time she smiled at me. Behind those dancing eyes was a spirit that showed me that she felt as young as I with the same career potential I had. We were equals, beginning a long friendship.

I left, "uplifted on the wings of genius." **W**